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I grew up in a very small town, where I went to a three-room school. Each room had its own library –a three-shelf bookcase, and only the bottom two shelves contained books.

It wasn't until I was 12 years old and we'd moved back to West Tennessee that I discovered the existence of *Public Libraries!* Of course, this was a small town, too, so it wasn't much of a library but there were more books than I'd ever seen in one place before, not counting Readmore Bookshop where they made you pay before you could have the books. The very concept of all-you-can-read-for-free thrilled me to the core.

The librarian at the time was Miss Mary, an elderly widow, very much the genteel but faded magnolia of Southern tradition. I'm not sure what her qualifications were, other than her social status and her love for books. Picture Aunt Clara from "Bewitched" with a parasol and a Southern accent.

The first time I walked into that library, saw all those books, and realized I could take home an armload at a time was also the first time I truly understood the meaning of frustration – I wanted them all right then and I didn't care what they were about. I had to settle for a little of everything, chosen at random. Consequently I went through stages of interest – for a few months I'd read history, then switch to science, then to animal husbandry and so on.

Miss Mary never quite caught on to my strategy, and she was a little foggy on the distinction between *Dracula* and forensic medicine. When I went through my occult stage, she became greatly distressed and told several patrons that she despaired of me. "She's a nice girl," she'd tell them, "but she is forevah checkin' out books on undertakin' and such morbid things as that."

Well, an interest in morbid subjects leads inevitably to murder, so it's no wonder I became a mystery writer. While most of my associates in this field trace their murderous leanings back to Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys, I can't make that claim. Nowhere in that three-shelf bookcase at school was there a single copy of Nancy Drew. It wasn't until after I'd may my way through a number of the books in Miss Mary's library that I stumbled upon Mary Stewart, Victoria Holt, and Phyllis Whitney. The die was cast!

Like most writers, the question I'm asked most often is 'where do you get your ideas?' I get ideas from my own morbid imagination, of course, but the best example I have of how an idea becomes a book is the genesis of my second mystery, All The Crazy Winters.

One morning a few years ago, I got to the library a few minutes early. I sat outside in my car, waiting for the doors to open, and after a bit I noticed that it was two or three minutes past the hour but the library still hadn't opened. A sane person would have assumed that her watch was fast or that the librarians were busy and just hadn't noticed the time. Ah, but I'm not sane; I'm a writer. I naturally assumed that someone had broken into the library and taken the entire staff hostage. For what purpose? I wondered. (Notice that at no time did it occur to me to see if these ladies needed my help) By the time the doors finally did open, I was halfway through the plot and needed only one minor point cleared up. Dashing inside, I asked, "What have you got in here that could be used as a murder weapon?" I guess librarians get asked that a lot, because they immediately started pointing out potential weapons.

Unlike Miss Mary, the current breed of librarians is pretty darned quick on the update. When I asked my local library to order some books for me about Jewish life and custom, the head librarian looked over the list and said, "Oh, there's a Jewish character in your next book." No one said, "I worry so about that child – she's forevah changin' her religion."

Libraries! Heaven on earth, and the only place an off-center, morbid child can truly find her own kind.